

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



Volume 3 No 205 25 May 2011 30p/80p

For a workers' government

Belittling rape

page 2



Egyptian union leader visits UK

pages 6-7

Bob Dylan and protest

page 9



Government and bosses smear railworkers and plan union-busting

The results of privatisation: seven people were killed at the Potters Bar derailment in May 2002. This month Network Rail was fined £3 million for neglect of the railway infrastructure

Government advisor Roy McNulty wants railworkers to pay for new rail investment by cutting wages and conditions.

More page 5

Renationalise the railways!

What is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists' relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.



Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity. The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges. We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses. Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups. We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

- We stand for:**
- Independent working-class representation in politics.
 - A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
 - A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
 - Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
 - A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
 - Open borders.
 - Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
 - Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
 - Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
 - Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.
 - If you agree with us, please take some copies of Solidarity to sell — and join us!

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Clarke, rape and society

By Vicki Morris

Justice Secretary Ken Clarke's stupid words about rape were seized on by the right-wing media to bash the Government's Green Paper "Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders".

The underlying message of the Green Paper is that prison is not the most cost-effective way to protect the public from crime. The Green Paper wants fewer people in prison — though not necessarily fewer prisons — fewer short sentences, more "community punishment", more people working or being trained while they are in prison. Newspapers such as the *Sun* and *Daily Express* reject the idea that "prison doesn't work", which is Clarke's tone. Conservative Douglas Hurd was the first

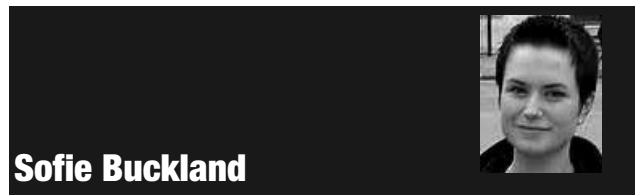
politician to dare to suggest this back in 1991. By 1993, Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard was insisting again that "prison works", responding in part to the right-wing media. The Prison Service is also under pressure, along with all other areas of government, to make cuts. Here as well, as elsewhere in the public services, the Tories think that letting the private sector in on the act will save money: companies such as Serco and Group 4 will get a bigger role and more chance to make profits from incarceration. On the rape issue, Clarke's words, suggesting that date rape, for example, is not "proper" or "classic" rape, reflect the fact that the length of a rape sentence depends to an extent on the amount of violence the perpetrator uses in the crime. The scale is already there, it's just that Clarke

seemed to imply it went from "not all that serious" to "serious", when in reality it goes from "serious" to "serious and particularly brutal". Up for debate in the Green Paper is whether criminals should have the chance to have their prison sentence cut in half if they confess before trial. Labour had already brought in reduction by one third. In the case of rape, the desire to increase the discount awarded for confessing does reflect partially the laudable intention of reducing the ordeal for victims testifying against an attacker who pleads not guilty. But that consideration is in tension with wider attitudes to rape. Clarke's stupidity on this occasion reflected the desire of society as a whole for victims of sexual crime to make as little fuss as possible, "get over it" and get on with their lives.

This desire exists for many reasons. Justice is time-consuming and expensive. The true scale of sexual violence in society is enormous and the resources needed to tackle it — through education and prevention, and through rehabilitating offenders — are not about to be made available. **And, finally, it's still easier, at least to some extent, to blame the victim.**

The politics of SlutWalk: discussion
7-9pm, Wed 1 June
Bishopsgate Institute, London E1. Initiated by Feminist Fightback

Strauss-Kahn and Assange



Sofie Buckland

Counterfire have published an article by Lindsey German questioning what it says about the French "left" (or, rather, Parti Socialiste) that a man with the reputation of Dominique Strauss-Kahn might be considered an acceptable Presidential candidate. It's perfectly valid to discuss what the emerging picture of Strauss-Kahn's behaviour tells us about the French political system and the sweeping under the carpet of vile sexist behaviour towards women in case it damages the cause. Funny, then, that German is unable to apply the same analysis to the Julian Assange case. Of course, Wikileaks is of the left — German talks at great length on this video about the "great service they have done for us", meaning the anti-war movement — unlike Parti Socialiste. She likes Wikileaks, thinks it needs defending, and so... participated in the exact same behaviour she's accusing the French social democrats of here. I've written about the *Guardian* letter calling for all charges to be dropped against Assange. You might have seen the set of YouTube videos of the Stop the War "Defend Wikileaks

and Julian Assange" meeting, particularly the one where Tony Benn makes light of rape, suggesting violence is a necessary component for a crime to have taken place. Lindsey German pops up on another, with a toe-curlingly embarrassing attempt to dismiss the rape accusations against Assange just seconds after reiterating her solid feminist credentials; the case, she says, is "not about what happened, and nobody knows what happened in this case, it's about the politics of ensuring Julian Assange is discredited". Could there be any clearer statement of utter contempt for Assange's alleged victims here? They're not genuine complainants, they're stooges of the CIA. We don't know what happened, but, really, we do: nothing. Unlike the Strauss-Kahn case, you won't find the allegations against Assange on the Counterfire site. As Angus Johnston has pointed out, failure to accurately report the allegations has become a central tactic of the Assange Defenders Club. Their followers/listeners/readers don't need to know the "facts", because the conspiracy is obvious. Just like DSK's chums in

the French political system, German springs to the defence of someone she is politically invested in defending, regardless of the ongoing struggle for rape allegations to be taken seriously; if we like them, if we appreciate their politics, if they're on our side, they're innocent and their accusers are lying for political reasons. Is German's dismissal of the Assange allegations any different from Jean-Marie Le Guen's desperate assertion that a conspiracy to bring down Strauss-Kahn is behind his arrest? Not really. You couldn't slide a cigarette paper between their responses. German is on the side of taking rape seriously here because Strauss-Kahn heads the IMF and PS are a centre-left party, not America-kicking, conspiracy-busting internet cowboys.

LEFT AND FEMINISM
The hypocrisy here is just another sad indictment of the state of the British left when it comes to feminism.

Quite aside from the Assange issue, the article goes on to a generally pathetic attempt at feminist analysis, displaying all the hallmarks of today's popular feminism picked up and turned round into something "socialist"; the impulse to zeitgeist ("the present political culture has turned a new page in its attitudes to women and sex", the "culture of the new rich"); the anti-capitalism

of idiots (casually linking "conspicuous consumption", the sale of sex, women as "sex objects" and sexual assault in a way that'd make an anti-porn rad fem proud); the portrayal of a Big Bad Patriarchy (Berlusconi, check. Sarkozy, check. "Politicians, bankers, industrialists and media tycoons", check) over sober analysis of power, class interest and political expediency — there's nothing here that couldn't be answered by calling for more women politicians and a social democratic government to rein in the excesses of consumer culture. It's just so *insufficient*, as if wheeling out a few tropes of popular feminism, chucking in a few anti-capitalist stock phrases and name-checking some bad guys makes up for failing to stick to socialist feminist principles when it actually matters. It matters when it's difficult. On Assange, German and her group Counterfire fell at the first hurdle, headlong into the mire of conspiracy and denial. The same cesspit fuels the defence of Strauss-Kahn, of all these rich, powerful men this article rails hard against — the conspiracy rumours, the denial, the victim-blaming allow them to get away with rape and sexual assault. **Forgive me if I remain sceptical of the commitment to feminism of a group who appear happy to throw this mud around when it suits them.**

Ridley flips on Libya

By Martyn Hudson

Yvonne Ridley, European President of the International Muslim Women's Union has defected and become a cheerleader for Libya's rebellion.

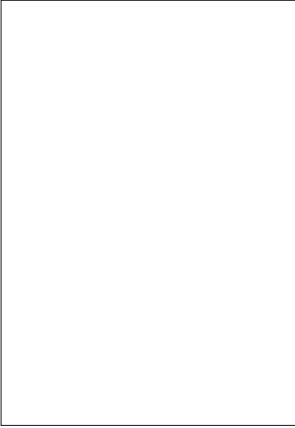
Ridley calls for full backing for Nato military intervention on the grounds that "it might just be regarded as a force for good".

Perhaps she wants to fan the flickers of the Islamist component of the rebellion against the Arab nationalist Qaddafi regime. Her teary eyed witnessing of regiments of young men off to fight tyranny is reminiscent of Church of England priests blessing their flocks of young men in the First World War as they were sent over the top.

The rebellion does not need friends like Yvonne Ridley.

Any practical socialist "intervention" would be profoundly different from that practised by Nato. We not fall in with those, like Ridley, who pick and choose the despotisms they like to support and are fully backing Nato intervention, whatever the consequences. Nor have any truck with Ridley's ex-pals in the rump of Respect and Stop the War, who consider the Qaddafi tyranny to be a progressive bastion against UK and US imperialism.

On recent Stop the War events arguments against "imperialist intervention"



Yvonne Ridley

have been coupled by some leftists with calls for a victorious rebellion against an "oil hungry west", which comes down to the same thing as saying victory to Qaddafi.

Hope lies with the imminent development of pro-democratic workers' forces in Libya, in conjunction with viral developments in Egypt and Tunisia and the utilisation of the spaces which intervention and the rebellion have already opened up. This means a truly consistent third camp approach — a question with which the rebellion itself is contending on a day to day basis.

Pro-Qaddafi forces have tried to demolish the humanitarian corridor around Yafran and Algalaa (to the west of Misrata) and escalate their attacks in the mountains on the Tunisian border. Both the French and the UK have responded by sending fleets of attack helicopters against regime forces.

Ostensibly a move to protect civilians, this looks more like an attempt to break the military stalemate now that the Misrata siege has been lifted. There have been attacks on the Bab-al-Aziziya compound with some casualties — leading to pro-regime demonstrations in the streets of Tripoli. A new phase in the intervention is beginning.

There is some political confusion in the US and the UK.

The US Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman has been involved in talks with the rebels in the east whilst refusing to fully recognise the National Transitional Council.

Both Shadow Defence Secretary Jim Murphy and the government's Secretary for Overseas Development Andrew Mitchell have issued statements

about the lack of an effective political strategy during the ongoing military campaign and potentially afterwards.

Obama and Cameron have issued what amounts to a joint statement against the Arab autocracies, calling for an increase in democracy and political liberty.

The Qaddafi regime continues to harass the civilian population. Reports from captured troops in Misrata say they were compelled to participate in gang rapes of women prisoners. Qaddafi's security forces are keeping his cities under close surveillance; no dissent is tolerated.

The brief sparks of rebellion in the west have amounted to little so far; but any rebel military victories in the heartland of Tripolitania could signal a new set of uprisings.

Syrian revolt holds up against the odds

By Colin Foster

Against all the odds, fierce repression by Syria's police state has not yet quelled street protest there.

Joshua Landis, a US expert on Syria, wrote on 21 May: "Syrian government statements that it had defeated the revolution with its brutal crackdown were premature.

"This Friday [20 May], Syrians came out to demonstrate across the country despite the growing danger of violence. The absolute number of demonstrators may not have been very great, but the number of demonstrations was..."

Landis reckons that "even if demonstrations can [eventually] be shut down for the time being, the opposition will not be defeated. Syria's youth... is now politicised, mobilised, and passionate".

Around 8,000 people have been jailed, according to the Syrian opposition blog Damascus Bureau, and uncertain hundreds have been killed by the army, but on Monday 23

May there were further street protests in the guise of funerals for some of those killed.

A blog posting on thedailybeast.com by a British student in Syria (18 May) says that the state violence is backed up by "distortion and disinformation" by the government-controlled media.

The government's story is that "the US, Israel, the satellite [news] channels, the radical [Islamist] cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi and others are part of some unholy alliance to bring down Syria".

The writer quotes a Syrian dissident as telling him that many people believe this stuff "because they want to, because they're afraid".

The regime still has some political base, cemented by fear, and the army mostly stays loyal. According to all reports, the opposition, though brave, is loosely organised, with no common programme beyond a general demand for democracy.

But still the revolt continues.

• Syria: the dog that didn't bark, page 4.

On our website

- **Debate with Peter Taaffe of the Socialist Party about Libya and NATO.** www.workersliberty.org/taaffe
- **Interview with Peter Thomas about his book "The Gramscian Moment".** www.workersliberty.org/pt
- **"Counterfire's Gramsci is a Gramsci with the feet cut off".** www.workersliberty.org/gramscifeet
- **Paul Hampton reviews Lars T Lih's new biography of Lenin.** www.workersliberty.org/lih
- **Obituary of Bob Gould, veteran Australian Trotskyist.** www.workersliberty.org/gould

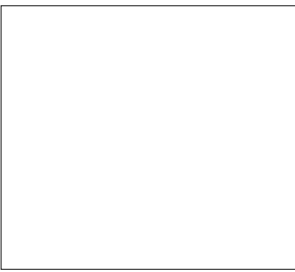
What kind of student campaign do we need?

The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts is holding a conference in Birmingham on 4 June. Bob Sutton, Vice-President-elect at Liverpool University Student Union, and Daniel Cooper, President elect at Royal Holloway Student Union, discuss the way forward for the campaign.

Students face fees of around £9,000 at the big majority of universities; they face huge cuts. The National Union of Students refuses to seriously fight back.

In these circumstances, the need for a national student network that links up grassroots anti-cuts groups, plans action and mobilises students alongside education and other workers in struggle is obvious.

Is the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts that network?



The experience of the NCAFC has been largely positive, bringing together student anti-cuts groups and activists from across the country and helping to galvanise mass action. During the student activism of last winter, the campaign gained widespread recognition and support.

For some time, however, the NCAFC has been hamstrung by its lack of democratic structures.

The loose, informal regional activist meetings which had taken decisions up until the end of 2010, with the London meeting

to some extent doubling as a national decision-making body, became less adequate as the pace of struggle rose

For instance: the call for the January 29 demonstrations in London and Manchester, eventually attended by 10,000 and 6,000 students, was made by a London NCAFC meeting called at a few days notice, and attended by less than a dozen people, the majority members of far left groups.

The lack of an adequate decision-making structure resulted in a number of easily avoidable disputes. The campaign missed several opportunities to call a national conference during the heat of the struggle.

At the January campaign conference those attending were almost exactly divided on whether more solid structures were necessary, and they were not established.

One result was that many agreed campaigning priorities fell by the wayside. Everything continued to be dominated by small groups of people able to attend central London meetings and heavily dominated by members of left groups.

Without a national coordinating body to function as a central core, regional groups did not meet. Eventually London meetings became less frequent as well.

The NCAFC is still capable of pulling off impressive activity (intervention in NUS conference, the campaign for a national demonstration, solidarity with the London Met anti-cuts struggle), but these happen as spurts rather than part of an ongoing, consistent, planned campaign.

This despite the continued existence of dozens of campus anti-cuts groups

which broadly support the campaign but, by and large, have little idea what it's doing.

The 4 June conference should establish a national committee to do the following:

- Facilitate national co-ordination between anti-cuts groups;
- Facilitate regional co-ordination by ensuring that regional meetings actually happen;
- Allow London meetings to function as just that — London meetings;
- Develop national initiatives, mobilisations and materials;
- Ensure that NCAFC supporters are kept informed of what the campaign is doing;
- Ensure clear, accountable channels for those taking action in the name of the campaign.

We would propose a simple structure of ten/twelve/fourteen peo-

ple elected by the 4 June conference, to be supplemented by delegates from any organisations which want to affiliate. This committee could make people within its ranks responsible for duties such as treasurer, secretary etc.

Any structures established at this conference should not be set in stone.

The tide of student activism has receded, but it has left a rich sediment behind, with many local anti-cuts groups and more student activists than before. This movement will most likely revive in the new year and it needs a strong, democratic national coordination.

We should take this opportunity to make NCAFC fit to play that role.

• Saturday 4 June, 11am-5pm, Birmingham University. Facebook: NCAFC Reinvigoration conference.

We want to see the opposition succeed

Syria: the dog that didn't bark



As I write these words, news has come in of the failure of Syria's opposition to hold a general strike.

One is reminded of Sherlock Holmes' comment about the curious incident of the dog in the night-time. When told that "the dog did nothing in the night-time" Holmes famously responded, "That was the curious incident."

It is not unusual for civil society organisations in repressive societies to issue a call for a general strike.

What is unusual is that the Syria call — reported on Facebook — got an instant statement out of the Brussels-based International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) expressing its strong support.

And then nothing happened. The general strike fizzled out.

What appears to be going on is that trade unionists, democrats, and human rights activists around the world are eager to see the "Arab Spring" succeed.

We all desperately want to see Qaddafi finally ousted from power. We want to see the Assad regime in Damascus fall. And more than anything, we long to see the end of the Iranian theocratic dictatorship.

But wanting to see these things happen is not enough. We must be aware of the social forces at work in these different countries and learn to anticipate events rather than be surprised by them.

The ITUC clearly doesn't want to be caught off-guard the next time there is a popular uprising in the region.

But it's vital to understand why the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were so successful, and why they have stalled in Libya and Syria.

Anyone who visited Egypt and met with the activists in groups like the Centre for Trade Union and Worker Services (CTUWS) a year or more ago would have realized the potential for an uprising.

Egypt, though an authoritarian society under Mubarak, had a civil society of sorts. Independent trade union organisations were being formed — the real estate tax collectors, for example. Strikes were common. You didn't have to be an expert to see change coming.

Tunisia had a real trade union movement (the UGTT), one with limited independence but real enough to be able to break from the regime at the right moment.

But Syria and Libya are not like that at all. We've heard little about independent worker organisations there in recent years.

Without something like the CTUWS, and its years of experience with building independent workers' organisations, it will be much harder to organise strikes — let alone a general strike — in a country like Syria.

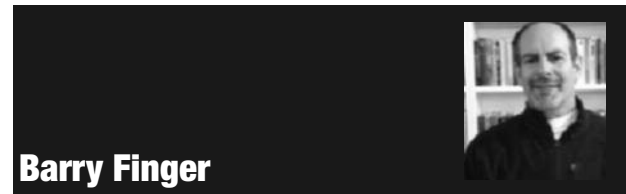
That's why if one looks for a country where workers might actually stage mass strikes, form independent unions, and topple a regime, one needs to look to Iran.

Iran is in some ways like Egypt was a few years ago. There is a very strong and militant workers' movement, independent of the regime. It has staged large-scale strikes, most notably shutting down Tehran's public transport system. The regime has reacted with severe brutality, hunting down union leaders and jailing them. Trade union activists have been flogged and murdered. But the resistance continues.

General strikes are not usually successful when called by well-meaning activists on Facebook — not unless there is a basis in the real world, in the working class, of independent organisations. We had that in Egypt, but didn't have it in Syria. That's the reason why Mubarak faces spending the rest of his life in jail, while Assad remains in power.

What didn't happen in Syria this week — the dog that didn't bark in the night-time — has much to teach us about how popular uprisings take place, and what needs to be done to make them succeed.

Obama's peace plan shows his weakness



Are the prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian peace any more imminent after President Obama's recent speech? Does it break any new ground?

The short answer would be no. Not because American imperial interests would not be better served by a two state solution. Brokering such a deal would enormously enhance America's prestige and credibility with an awakening Arab street, a public justifiably suspicious of Western intentions given imperialism's history of sustaining their oppressors.

The world of imperial puppetry, where elite interests are manipulated through authoritarian surrogates — the house of Saud, the Mubaraks and Ben Alis — is drawing to a close. This is no mystery to Obama. The real problem is that despite the two state solution being the overwhelming consensus among US policy makers and its citizenry, there is no energised constituency for this within the American electorate.

Rarely do Americans concern themselves with foreign policy issues, and even less do they take to the streets, unless these issues entail questions of large scale and prolonged commitment of American ground forces.

And to the extent that there is a vocal element willing to raise campaign money and weigh in on this conflict, these voices belong to the Christian right, and to those activist sections of the Jewish community who are either generally conservative or progressive in all matters save Israel. In other words, America is hostile territory for any American politician willing to stake ground anywhere on the Israel-Palestinian conflict to the left of Likud or for any left-wing Israeli politician looking to these shores for encouragement.

American initiatives with the Netanyahu government have predictably proved to be both nonstarters and sources of domestic humiliation and loss of credibility for Obama.

Every time Israel has been asked to make a show of good faith by returning to the negotiating table, the Israelis have coupled their begrudging return with enhanced settlement activity. Even the US's special envoy, George Mitchell, a veteran negotiator in the Northern Ireland conflict, resigned in frustration with the lack of seriousness on the part of Israel to move beyond its imperious comfort zone, a status quo where they have the upper hand, and seek a permanent solution that also accommodates legitimate Palestinian aspirations. Netanyahu's immediate rebuff of Obama's initiative was entirely predictable.

But the Palestinians forced Obama's hand, first by Hamas reconciling with the Palestinian Authority and then by their

threat to seek international recognition by bringing the issue of self-determination to a UN vote this autumn. And Obama outmanoeuvred himself by playing into the right's game, foolishly describing the Palestinian strategy as an attempt to "de-legitimate" Israel. Sitting this out and letting Netanyahu squirm as September approached would have been a fitting answer to Israeli obstructionism.

Without any overt threats at loss of military or financial assistance, a simple failure to exercise a UN veto would have sent an electrifying message to the Israeli establishment that they can no longer expect carte blanche American support.

But letting Israel pickle in its own isolation would also have opened the administration up to the charge of dithering if not outright betrayal by Likud's echo chamber on the American right. Obama simply lacks the political chops to resist these charges, as do most American politicians.

1967 BORDERS

Obama's speech reflects all these frailties. He outlined a peace based on the 1967 borders with mutually agreed land swaps. The Oslo accords only provided for Palestinian self-government, which Israel can arguably insist they already enjoy.

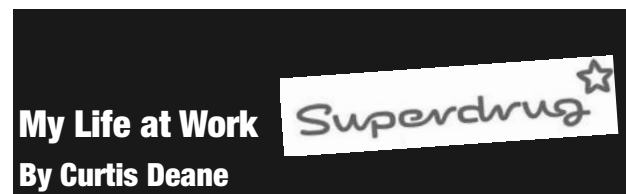
Obama's call for Palestinian self-determination within a contiguous state is certainly a step beyond these accords. But otherwise his proposals are a restatement of the official position of the United States for the past two decades, including the exclusion of any commitment on the future of Jerusalem as a shared capital.

Moreover, Obama's characterisation of Israel not as a Jewish homeland, but as a Jewish state, is detrimental to the interests of 1.2 million Christian and Muslim Israelis, who are shamelessly relegated to second-class citizenship by that understanding. This anti-democratic formulation thoughtlessly discards the potential role that these communities, if fully integrated, could otherwise play as a bridge to reconciliation between Israel and the wider Arab world.

A serious peace offensive on Obama's part would necessitate confronting Israeli and Palestinian leaders with a detailed vision of a just and lasting peace. This is not a matter of imposing a peace, but of igniting the democratic yearnings and imaginations that both peoples share for a normalised future free of war and the threat of war. It would require Obama to appeal over the heads of the entrenched and intransigent leaders of Israel (and their American patrons) and sell this vision directly to people of Israel and Palestine. That would have dispelled Netanyahu's claim that giving up the West Bank settlements will endanger Israeli security, while deflating Palestinian irredentism, which feeds on continued Israeli oppression without realistic prospect for relief and redress.

It would also entail standing up to homegrown reaction, the last thing one can expect from this administration, whose progressive bark is invariably belied by its toothless bite.

Organising in retail



Until recently I worked as a shop assistant at Superdrug in Egham, Surrey. I'm at university so can't work as much as I need to to make ends meet.

Egham is a small town and the shop is even smaller. The pay, even in comparison to other high street shops, is dire; a few pence above the minimum wage. The conditions are not much better; a tiny, underequipped tea room with nowhere to store belongings.

This may sound inconsequential, but it's an annoyance for everyone who works there. Superdrug workers, particularly the under-21s, recently faced an attack on pay and conditions. Based on the company's recent poor results (although they refused to respond to anyone who contested these figures), it decided to impose a 25% wage cut, reduce holiday and sick pay and the amount of break-time.

Staff at Superdrug locally are mainly students and part-time workers (young mums) and both groups already held flexible, weak contracts — could be made unemployed relatively easily. Those that refused to sign new contracts were told they would be made immediately redundant. Unfortunately most didn't know what a union's function was and the benefits of involving themselves in "political" activity.

The company set up a "working group" system to "consult" with their staff about the changes. These working groups were usually badly advertised and attended only by floor managers who were disconnected from, and disliked by, ordinary staff. The serious attack on conditions affected others far more than me. Young mums, who already paid significant amounts to even get to work, had their pay cut. Most were already living in hostels and insecure accommodation.

I joined the GMB whilst these changes were taking place, but they didn't help where help was desperately needed. The union could have done more.

Throughout my time at Superdrug staff were discontented, always discussing the (awful) behaviour of our management. There was a palpable anger at how staff were being treated, even before the restructuring; about shift patterns and break times.

I managed to get three other members of staff to join the GMB, and we began to hold informal meetings in the pub about how to best organise. This began to escalate somewhat when a strike was held by Superdrug staff in the Midlands but most staff, due to their job insecurity, were unwilling to take action. Continued activity became increasingly difficult as I had to attend university.

Retail has been historically viewed as difficult to unionise for a number of reasons. From my experience, I think there is the real potential for unions to recruit and, more importantly, organise and radicalise members in retail. But it will take a lot of hard work.

• More in this series: tinyurl.com/mylifeatwork

Renationalise the railways!

After seventeen years of rail privatisation, and wave upon wave of attack on railworkers’ conditions, the Government has suddenly declared that railworkers are featherbedded.

Welcoming the McNulty report, published on 19 May, it has signalled an assault on railworkers’ pay and conditions, with the threat of new anti-strike laws to hand if the unions resist.

The truth is not that railworkers have been living in a previously unremarked pocket of luxury.

The Government is spending a lot of money on rail in a time of financial difficulty for the state. Big investment projects like Crossrail and the Birmingham high-speed link, when they come on stream, will give railworkers great potential industrial power. So will the Olympics. The Government wants to crush railworkers’ union strength before that happens.

Sir Roy McNulty, author of the report, writes that the rail industry must earn its “licence to grow”. He means that projects like Crossrail and HS2 (the high speed link between Birmingham and London) must be funded by savings from existing rail budgets.

A large part of those cuts from existing budgets, using the most realistic of the report’s scenarios, is to come from reduced staff costs (£260 million out of £740 million by 2018/9).

In particular, the report recommends that driver-only operation should become the “default” for train services. In other words, it recommends making almost all train guards redundant.

The unions must respond immediately and in a forthright manner. The Government will try to ride out the political flak that large-scale national rail strikes will cause. We have to ensure that they can’t.

The McNulty report was commissioned by the previous Labour government. It is a ten-year plan for making railworkers pay for the modernisation of the railway and the failures of privatisation, which has led to a government subsidy for the private rail operators of £5 billion a year compared to the £1 billion a year paid to the old nationalised British Rail.

The report expresses concern about the fragmentation of the railways. Phrases like “whole-system approach”, “system-wide”, and “seamless approach” litter the document.

The obvious way to get an integrated railway is renationalisation. McNulty dismisses it. He says he “has no political or theological view”, but laments the “enormous costs that could be involved in renationalisation”.

That indicates ideological blindness. Why couldn’t the franchises be allowed to expire, and pass back to public ownership, costing nothing? And as it is, the Government already owns Network Rail.

As the rail expert Christian Wolmar, writing for the rail union TSSA, puts it, McNulty “did not draw the obvious conclusion — that privatisation and fragmentation are at the root cause of the industry’s overspending...



“McNulty has allowed himself to be constrained by the same old neo-liberal agenda: private sector is best, state is inefficient and so on. The biggest irony... is that Britain’s railways are less efficient than their state run neighbours”.

Railworkers want, not just a technically-efficient state-run system, but a railway which would be part of an integrated public transport system, run by workers’ control, ecologically sound, and serving the needs of the majority rather than primarily of first-class-ticket businesspeople.

Renationalisation is the first step. But, decrying the bureaucratic inefficiency of the old nationalised British Rail, McNulty recommends more bureaucracy through the creation of national bodies to achieve network integration.

He engages in doublespeak on employee relations. He admits that his report’s “recommendations would inevitably lead to significant changes for the people in the rail industry”, but blandly comments: “Improved employee relations will make the industry better able to handle the significant changes”.

Pull the other one! How will the threat of mass redundancies and worsening terms and conditions improve employee relations? Unless of course “improved employee relations” means silencing those pesky trade unions...

McNulty looks to the Government to “put in place incentives and contractual mechanisms that encourage change”. In other words he wants the government to continue with the practice of compensating train companies for lost revenue as a result of industrial action but on a much larger scale.

It is certain he will get the Government to “support the industry in making these changes”. Just recently, speaking

at the bosses club, the Institute of Directors, George Osborne told business leaders to “get stuck in” against “unions and interest groups”. Some much for the bosses, their Government and its hired hands, what about the unions.

The unions have come out against the report, but not in a sufficiently focused or urgent manner. McNulty is looking for some “quick wins” to generate momentum in the “change programme”. The unions need to respond likewise.

A union action plan would include the following points:

- Setting up a fighting fund to enable the unions to run longer disputes than the one or two-day strikes which have become the norm in recent years;
- The unions should order their financial affairs so as to minimise the effects of sequestration.
- The unions should set up procedures (“pattern bargaining”) to enable them to run a dispute across several different companies at once.
- Encourage railworkers to take their campaign into local anti-cuts groups and trades councils — to mobilise support and when the time comes, strike solidarity.
- Cross-union liaison and united action. Rail unions should campaign to involve their members in local anti-cuts campaigns.
- A big public political campaign, starting now, for rail renationalisation, against new anti-strike laws, and for the comprehensive restoration of workers’ rights to strike, picket, and organise.

The rail unions affiliated to the Labour Party, ASLEF and TSSA, should use their affiliation to press this political campaign within the Labour Party and demand support from Labour leaders and MPs.

Preparing for 30 June



In some areas, notably Nottingham, union activists are preparing for the probable strike against pension cuts on 30 June in one way.

They are organising a joint strike committee of the unions likely to take part — NUT (teachers), ATL (teachers), PCS (civil service), and UCU (lecturers). They are inviting representatives of other unions whose members face the public-sector pension cuts, and job cuts, like Unison, GMB, and Unite, and people from anti-cuts campaigns, to come along too.

For 30 June itself they plan a proper strikers’ meeting, where strikers can debate and put proposals on the next steps for the campaign.

In other areas, it is different. The preparation is in the hands of full-time union officials, with cross-union liaison only at top level. The plan for 30 June is marches and rallies, with workers listening to a string of union leaders and then going home to await the top officials’ wisdom on what happens next.

A lot depends on which approach dominates. 30 June is the first splash of substantial generalised trade-union action against a Coalition Government programme which threatens both the services and benefits we depend on to civilise capitalism and the very fabric of the trade union movement. After 26 years of difficulty since the defeat of the miners’ strike in 1985, union strength has become heavily concentrated in the public sector. On 2010 figures, public-sector employees accounted for 62.4 per cent of all union members, but only 17.6 per cent of non-members.

We want the demands of the dispute and our future industrial strategy to be worked out in the democratic structures of the union (not in union head offices). Workers must start to ask the questions — what would constitute a victory? What are we doing after 30 June to secure that victory? So far, the unions have left these questions open.

If 30 June is allowed to pass as a limp one-off protest, then the Government will increase its attacks. If 30 June becomes the start of a growing ferment of resistance, then the unions can rebuild themselves and their strength.

The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty has called a joint meeting on Saturday 28 May of our “fractions” (organised groups of members) in the key sectors involved: teachers, civil service workers, lecturers, local government workers, health workers. Some members of our “fractions” in other sectors — rail and media — and of our “fraction” in the giant conglomerate union Unite will also be attending.

The meeting will be open to interested non-members of AWL who work closely with us in those unions.

The aim to exchange experiences and work out a common line for organising for 30 June and for the struggle after 30 June. This will provide the basis for AWL members’ motions, amendments, speeches and so on in the different unions.

We will discuss the response we should advocate if some employer should gain a court injunction against the 30 June strike. Recent court cases have shown that the minor errors inevitable in a union ballot of a large, diverse, and often-changing workforce provide enough basis for an employer to get an injunction against any large strike ballot result if he wishes. The “balance of convenience” is always on the side of banning a strike. But isn’t this the one occasion, of all occasions in recent years or the foreseeable near future, when the unions should be bold enough to defy an obviously class-biased court ruling?

The meeting will also hear reports from the diverse local anti-cuts committees round the country, and formulate views on the best way for them to go forward.

The AWL National Committee already discussed many of these questions in a meeting on 7 May, and has produced a discussion document to be updated, corrected, and expanded by the discussion at the 28 May meeting.

- Discussion document: www.workersliberty.org/pointers

EGYPTIAN TRADE UNION TOUR

“The creativity of the working class”

Between 18 and 21 May, Kamal Abbas and Tamer Fathy of Egypt's Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services visited Britain, on a tour hosted by the FBU, the TUC and the Egypt Workers' Solidarity (EWS) campaign. Sacha Ismail reports on discussions which he, Paul Hampton and Elaine Jones had with Kamal and Tamer.

Kamal Abbas has been active in Egyptian workers' struggles since the mid-1970s. His thirty three year career as an activist encompasses a vast array of experiences, from producing rank-and-file bulletins to leading a workers' uprising under a hail of rubber bullets.

Kamal spent time in prison and on the run, and as recently as 2008 the Mubarak regime was still trying to lock him up. With the overthrow of Mubarak, he and the organisation he leads are at the forefront of Egypt's burgeoning independent workers' movement.

You could not tell the story of Egyptian workers over the last four decades without returning to the story of Kamal Abbas. The two are intertwined in one narrative which is not only fascinating and inspiring, but rich with lessons.

GOING TO WORK

“After the war with Israel in 1973,” Kamal told us, “every-one in Egyptian society wanted to do volunteer work”, to dedicate themselves to improve society. Many people volunteered for the army.

It was during his time in the army that Kamal met university students who were revolutionary socialists who convinced him about socialist ideas. After he finished his service he put his principles into practice by getting a job in the giant iron and steel works in Helwan, an industrial town south of Cairo.

Kamal was one of many young Egyptian activists to go and work in industry — in the same way that AWL members and other young socialists have got jobs in sectors like the railways or the health service in order to take part in the class struggle. Kamal says it was an obvious move to make at a time of growing working-class militancy in Egypt, culminating in a general strike and uprising against the removal of food subsidies in 1977 — the year that Kamal went to work.

Kamal would work in Helwan for the next twelve years, experimenting with all kinds of methods of struggle. They gradually built up grassroots organisation and a base of support among the plant's 20,000 workers.

In 1979 he was elected to the executive of the official “union” in the factory, but was prevented from taking his position. From 1958, under Nasser, all unions had been amalgamated into a single federation, controlled by the state. In the formal sector of the economy, membership in these “unions” was compulsory. The regime was authoritarian rather than totalitarian, and the take over of the unions did not completely crush workers' struggles — but it did make it impossible for a really independent labour movement to develop. “It was then,” Kamal says, “that I realised independent

Kamal told us:

“When I was working in Helwan, I never stopped being inspired by the dynamism and the creativity of workers in struggle. And it is not just a question of Egypt. Look at your own history in Britain, going back two hundred years, or look at other countries. When I am at a conference like this, in a hotel, I always think back to when I started working in that steel factory, and what I learned there and have learned since about the potential of the working class.”

unions were the key”.

In the 1980s, Kamal and other activists organised around a bulletin called *Workers' Speech*. It became very widely circulated, and helped create a climate in which “no one was afraid” to discuss and circulate ideas and initiatives. All kinds of workers' publications blossomed. The culmination of this growth in workers' confidence was the strike of 1989, which developed into a virtual uprising against the regime and ended with Kamal's expulsion from the factory.

Although it was over the apparently minor issue of lunch subsidies, this huge strike called forth vicious repression from the army and the police, who invaded the factory. Although the strikers eventually won their demands and more, many activists and leaders were hunted down. Kamal and others fled to avoid torture, or worse. Although he was captured and interrogated, he was released after a month and half in prison — but had lost his job.

NEW BEGINNING

It was then that the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services began to cohere.

As far back as 1986, working-class activists in Helwan and other centres had talked about setting up a campaign for real trade unions, independent of the state. The wave of solidarity from other workers and from many opposition political organisations which accompanied the Helwan strike made this seem like the right time to launch the project. Kamal slept on people's sofas, worked night and day and visited as many of his former colleagues as possible asking for money and support. The CTUWS was born in March 1990.

From the start the Centre faced occasional repression and constant denunciation from the regime. A few years ago, Tamer told me, the front page of a widely-read government newspaper claimed that the CTUWS were foreign agents paid to undermine the Egyptian economy. (He understood exactly when I told him how *Sun* denounced the FBU as Iraqi agents during the 2002-3 firefighters' strike.)

The first decade was hard. The CTUWS received some funding from Oxfam, but relied mainly on the good will and support of Egyptian worker activists, particularly in Helwan. It was able to play a role in a large number of disputes, and open offices in four other cities. It became a highly visible force, attracting many workers in struggle as well as others

looking for a way to oppose the government (this includes Tamer, who became politicised as a student and began his work with the CTUWS as a translator). But it was with the growth of Egyptian workers' struggles in the new century that the Centre really came into its own.

From 2004, Egypt was shaken by a growing wave of working-class militancy — sparked by both declining living standards and a feeling that the old order was crumbling. One of the most spectacular struggles was by the 27,000 textile workers of the Nile Delta town of Mahalla el Kubra.

In 2008 the strike committee of local government-employed real estate tax collectors, victorious in their dispute over parity with central government income tax collectors, converted itself into an independent union, RETA, and won recognition from the state. That was a massive step forward. Other independent unions, among health technicians, teachers and pensioners followed.

The CTUWS was already in touch with most of the key activists behind these battles, but with the rise of independent unions its role became crucial. It stood “shoulder-to-shoulder” with them. As well as helping train leaders and organisers for the new unions, helping write their constitutions and providing legal support, it facilitated links with the international trade union movement — particularly Public Services International, to which RETA became affiliated.

More than anything else, Kamal says, it was the space won by the new, independent unions, with the help of the CTUWS, that prepared the way for the downfall of the Mubarak regime.

THE REVOLUTION

At start of the revolution, according to Tamer, the labour movement was submerged in the general tide of mass protest, which included many thousands of middle-class youth. He himself spent a lot of time protesting in Tahrir Square. The initial workers' demonstrations called by the CTUWS were not particularly successful.

Before long, however, they succeeded in bringing representatives of the independent unions and other workers in various sectors together — in a corner of Tahrir Square! — to form an independent union federation, the Egyptian Federation for Independent Unions. Simultaneously, they stepped up their campaign among workers, calling for workers to combine participation in the revolution with building independent organisation in the workplaces.

The CTUWS was deluged by different groups of workers eager to build unions — and, as Mubarak attempted to cling to power, workers entered the stage of the revolution in their own right by organising a wave of strikes. These strikes, which combined protest against the regime with workplace demands, often focusing on the removal of crony managers as well as wages, conditions and so on, grew to the point where activists were discussing a general strike — but then Mubarak went. The workers' mobilisation had broken the back of his rule.

There are now 20 independent unions, although Kamal

IDEAS FOR FREEDOM 2011 8-10 JULY

Ideas for Freedom is the annual weekend of socialist discussion and debate hosted by Workers' Liberty. IFF 2011 will take place on 8-10 July at Highgate Newtown Community Centre, 25 Bertram Street, London N19 5DQ. www.workersliberty.org/ideas

FROM TUNIS TO LONDON: THE WORKERS' AGENDA

Friday night showing of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Strike*.

Saturday-Sunday (9-10 July) sessions include:

- The fight for a workers' government, with Sean Matgamna
- Ziyad from Morocco's Revolutionary Marxist Current on the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East
- Janine Booth on Poplar, Labour and fighting the cuts
- Clive Bradley on the rise of the Egyptian working class
- London Met SU president Claire Locke, Royal Holloway SU president Daniel Cooper and Michael Chessum of NUS National Executive on the student movement
- Aaron Peters and Eric Lee on the internet and class struggle

We will also be running "Introduction to Marxism" sessions on: What is Leninism?; Are socialists “multiculturalists”?; “Humanitarian intervention”: do socialists always say ‘No’?; Who was Rosa Luxemburg?; Is Britain a democracy?

A Saturday night social, free creche and accommodation and cheap food. For more information email awl@workersliberty.org or ring 07796 690 874. Tickets bought before the end of May are £18 waged, £10 low-waged/students, £6 unwaged/school students (one day £10, £6, £4).



Kamal Abbas and Tamer Fathy (left) speaking at FBU conference

said that it was very possible more had formed in the few days he had been out of Egypt! They have their own offices, and will hold their first congress in the autumn.

Tamer said he thought these unions had about a million members, as against the three million who were formally in the state “unions”. He was hoping for three million by the end of the year. Though Egypt is a country with over 80 million people, many are young and many are small farmers. Three million would be an impressive start.

When asked at the London public meeting about how to avoid the development of an over-fed bureaucracy, Kamal said he thought it could be avoided by an emphasis on democracy and rank-and-file control. On the other hand, Egyptian workers “have a bad experience” of unions which the new movement feels ill-equipped to overcome. He stressed how much they need training for activists, organisers and leaders from established labour movements in other countries.

THE NEW UNIONS

The unions are currently campaigning about the minimum wage (and maximum wage), permanent jobs for precarious workers and renationalisation of privatised industries. Kamal argued that while the working class has won some important democratic space, the neo-liberal economic model entrenched under Mubarak is very much intact.

They are also demanding the scrapping of existing labour laws and a legal right to strike. The new regime has declared strikes illegal (supposedly as a temporary measure), though with little effect.

We asked Kamal and Tamer about the role of women in the new movement. This is what Kamal said:

“In the five years before the resignation of Mubarak, there were 3,000 strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations... Women participated strongly, even confronting the security forces, and were amazing. In some strikes workers slept out in the streets, and women participated in this too, though it goes against Egyptian traditions and customs. And women have played an important role in the independent unions, though not as much as we would have hoped.”

The CTUWS involves many women activists but has not set up any specific groups or campaigns for women. Kamal

said that the Centre and the new unions are “concerned with workers, and we don’t differentiate between male and female workers.” At the same time, he and Tamer did accept that women workers face specific issues like childcare, the double burden of work at home, discrimination at work and sexual harassment. This is clearly an issue where the Egyptian workers’ movement needs discussion and development.

A WORKERS’ PARTY?

An important issue we discussed with Kamal and Tamer was that of working-class political representation, and whether there is a need to build a workers’ party in Egypt.

There are elections coming up in September; Kamal told us that the only force really well organised for them is the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Tamer thought that if they wanted to, the Brotherhood could win a majority (in fact it is only standing for half the seats). This is because of Egypt’s large rural population, and because the Brotherhood provides basic services which the Egyptian government does not (like Hamas in Gaza).Unlike many leftists in Britain, Kamal and Tamer think this is a serious threat. They both consider

leading the great strike of 1989, and how me and my colleagues stayed strong and resisted in prison. We did this because we believed it was our duty.

And I remember my journey in building the Centre for Trade Union and Workers’ Services, as an organisation advocating and fighting for workers’ rights — above all, workers’ right to build their own, independent unions, and the right to strike. For the sake of those two rights, we went through many battles; we faced many obstacles. Each time I found myself in front of the interrogators, I said to myself: I am doing my duty.

And when we participated in the revolution, from the beginning, we passionately wanted workers to play their role in its victory. We released statements, we organised meetings

the clash between those who want a religious state and those who want a “civilian” (i.e. secular) state a defining issue in the period ahead. Kamal told us: “Yes, we consider them to be a great threat to workers. Why? Because the basic principle of the labour movement is to be built on the basis of no discrimination according to sex, religious or race, but they [the MB] are based on discrimination. They will not tolerate the participation of women, or Christians, or other minorities. Then if you look at their economic program you can find that it is neo-liberal. So how can they be in favour of the working class? They are against any socialist or even social organisation, so yes they are a great threat.”

For Workers’ Liberty, this only increases the need for a working-class political force which can link the new labour movement with other struggles for democracy and liberation, and present a clear pole of attraction to the discontented. Tamer, for instance, spoke of many thousands of young people who are mobilised around the issue of secularism; then there are the secularising youth of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whom could surely be pruned away if there was a clear alternative.

But Kamal and Tamer felt that this was premature. They think it is necessary to build up the unions much stronger before a workers’ political party can become viable. No doubt they are concerned not to wreck the new movement, which naturally involves workers with all sorts of political viewpoints, by rushing a political project. They felt that the new initiative of the Workers’ Democratic Party, launched by some union and left activists, is too weak to achieve much. We disagreed. The discussions will continue.

LEARNING FROM EGYPTIAN WORKERS

Egypt’s new labour movement needs solidarity. They want official recognition, messages of support, direct links and training from unions in other countries. They feel they have a lot to learn.

But while the Egyptian workers can learn from workers’ movements in other countries, we can also learn from them.

The long-defeated, sluggish and heavily bureaucratic British labour movement needs the spirit of daring, creativity, self-sacrifice and revolt which has allowed the Egyptian unions to play a central role in their country’s revolution. In absorbing that spirit, we can also rediscover and develop the best traditions of working-class struggle in our own country.

Solidarity with Egypt unions will be at the core of the new working-class internationalism necessary in the coming period of fightback against capitalist austerity and repression.

and we played our full role in the revolution. In the last days of the revolution, we used the weapon of strikes — and we felt that we had done our duty.

After the revolution, we moved towards forming more independent unions. We toured around Egypt’s industrial cities, to help and encourage workers to form independent unions, based on democracy, unions dominated by workers’ will and capable of defending their rights. And when we did this, we thought we were doing our duty.

And today I trust that, as you meet together in this conference, you will discuss how to defend the rights of firefighters, those heroes who risk their lives as a price for doing their duty. To all of you I pay my regards and respects.

Firefighters welcome Egyptian trade unionists

Kamal and Tamer attended the Fire Brigades Union annual conference, where they were presented with an engraved fire axe by general secretary Matt Wrack and warmly welcomed by delegates. They spent half a day at the TUC, meeting officials from a variety of other unions. They also spoke at two EWS public meetings, one in Liverpool attended by 70 activists and one in London attended by 140 (standing room only!) This is text of Kamal’s speech to FBU conference.

I’m happy to speak to firefighters’ delegates. Firefighters who risk their lives for the sake of duty.

When I think back to when I started my life as a worker, in the iron and steel industry, I remember when I took part in

Anarchism and the Commune

This is the third and final part of a review article on *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt. It covers the history of the First International, the workers' movement in which Karl Marx was active from its founding in 1864 and the anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin was active from 1868. It reviews the split in the International, in 1872, in which Marx and Bakunin were the leading figures on opposing sides, and the broad outlines of anarchist development since 1872.

The First International recruited substantially from its activity in supporting workers' strikes. It was initially a conglomerate of many shadings of socialist thought and many people who were not really socialists at all but rather radical democrats. In 1864 all the schools of socialist thought, Marx's too, lacked authoritative, readily-available texts codifying their ideas.

In 1864 nothing written by Marx was in general circulation. The Communist Manifesto of 1848 had had no new edition in any language since 1850. New editions in various languages appeared after 1865, as the International created a reading public for them, but only after.

Marx's *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* had been published in 1859; but only in German, and it was a severe economic text, with no immediate politics in it. Marx published *Capital* volume 1 of in 1867 (in German), and a French translation came out in 1872-5 (an English translation, in 1886).

By patient argument within the International, Marx won a majority for three key ideas:

One: that strikes and trade unions must not only be supported, but were central to the working class organising and educating itself for emancipation. In a long debate in the General Council with an old Owenite socialist, John Weston, Marx refuted the alleged "iron law of wages" believed by many socialists at the time, according to which capitalism inevitably reduced wages to a subsistence minimum and all battles for higher wages must be fruitless.

Two: that the working class must aim for the expropriation of the capitalists and public ownership of the means of production. (The Proudhonists traditionally looked instead to the growth of a network of workers' cooperatives linked by "fair exchange" and crowding out capitalist production rather than expropriating the capitalists. Bakunin sided with Marx on this).

Three: that the working class must engage in political action (battles for reforms made by law, and electoral action) as well as economic struggle.

CLIMAX

The climax of Marx's activity in the First International was his writing of "The Civil War in France", the International's statement of solidarity with the Paris Commune of March-May 1871.

This was the major text by Marx likely to be read by the activists of the International. "Marxism", for the purposes of the 1872 split, meant the ideas expressed in *The Civil War in France*, and in the resolutions of the First International.

Engels, later, would summarise his and Marx's argument: "Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat".

In the text itself Marx argued that the Commune was "essentially a working-class government... the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour".

It had shown that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes". The working class must create a new form of state, a semi-state as Lenin would call it.

The Commune had suppressed the standing army and substituted for it the armed people. It was made up of elected representatives who were accountable to their voters and easily recallable.

It was "a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time" — not like a bourgeois parliament, which, at best, limits and demands consultation from an executive government separate from it and standing above it.

It had done away with any separate, privileged bureaucratic corps of unelected state officials. "From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen's wages".

Explaining how his view differed from the anarchists, Marx wrote that "this new Commune, which breaks the

Anarchists and communists supported the Paris Commune

modern State power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the medieval Communes" (idealised by Bakunin, and, later, even more so by Kropotkin). "The Communal constitution has been mistaken for an attempt to break up into a federation of small states". (Bakunin and his friends insisted that the future society must be a federation of small local units). Local liberties should be guaranteed: but "the few but important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally mis-stated, but were to be discharged by Communal... agents".

The Civil War in France was the main text on which Lenin would later draw to write his *State and Revolution*, and the Bolsheviks to propose the rule of workers' councils (soviets) as the form of a workers' regime.

Although they are warm towards the "council communists", who favoured workers' councils but came to reject a centralised revolutionary party and electoral activity by revolutionary socialists — some of them also to reject trade-union activity — Schmidt and van der Walt make no explicit and definite comment on workers' councils, and in some passages seem to hold on to the pre-1914 revolutionary syndicalist line that trade unions, when smartened up enough, will embody workers' rule.

In any case, a split against a "Marxism" defined principally by *The Civil War in France* was assuredly not a split against a socialism of manipulating the existing state machine or "one-party dictatorship through an authoritarian state".

What did Bakunin and his friends say at the time? They supported the Commune and agreed with Marx on that against the English trade union leaders in the International who recoiled in horror from the Paris workers' revolution and Marx's fierce defence of it. Like the Marxists, they would continue to honour the Commune and celebrate its anniversaries. As far as I know, they gave no direct reply to Marx's swipe at them in *The Civil War*.

JACOBINISM

Bakunin complained that "in order to fight the monarchist and clerical reaction they [the Commune] were compelled to organise themselves in a Jacobin manner, forgetting or sacrificing the first conditions of revolutionary socialism".

Kropotkin, later, would be even more critical of the Commune as too "Jacobin".

Marx and Engels, by contrast, later, when the lapse of time had given licence for franker criticism of the Commune than would have been decent at the time of its bloody suppression by the French bourgeoisie, wrote (in effect) that the Commune had not been "Jacobin" enough — not forceful, radical, pushy enough. "In the economic sphere much was left undone which, according to our view today, the Commune ought to have done. The hardest thing to understand is certainly the holy awe with which they remain standing respectfully outside the gates of the Bank of France. This was also a serious political mistake. The bank in the hands

of the Commune — this would have been worth more than ten thousand hostages [in terms of pressure on the bourgeois government at Versailles]".

In 1871 Bakunin wrote about his encounters with Marx in the 1840s. "As far as learning was concerned, Marx was, and is still, incomparably more advanced than I... He called me a sentimental idealist, and he was right; I called him vain, perfidious, and cunning..."

In 1872 the distinguishing mark of Bakunin and his friends was still "sentimental idealism" — the sentimental rejection of the necessary means of struggle in the name of a vague scheme for an instant ideal stateless future society.

Marx regarded the Bakunin wing as a relapse of a section of the International into the old utopian socialism.

"We cannot repudiate these patriarchs of socialism [the old utopian socialists], just as chemists cannot repudiate their forebears the alchemists, [but] we must at least avoid falling back into their mistakes, which, if we were to commit them, would be inexcusable".

Relapse was given momentum by the general backlash after the defeat of the Commune. In a similar way, the backlash after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions had led in September 1850 to a split in the Communist League in which the anti-Marx faction, according to Marx, fell into an approach where "the will, rather than the actual conditions, was stressed as the chief factor in the revolution" and "the word 'proletariat' [was] reduced to a mere phrase, like the word 'people' was by the democrats".

Later Plekhanov, in his pamphlet *Anarchism and Socialism*, would expound Marx's thought in more detail, arguing that "in their criticism of the 'political constitution', the 'fathers' of anarchy always based themselves on the Utopian point of view", namely on the assertion that human nature favours liberty and solidarity, the state is an artificial imposition, and capitalism is the product of the state.

Bakunin, moving from his native Russia to study in Germany in 1840, became a revolutionary democrat in the 1840s. In 1849 he was praised by Marx for his role in a rising in Dresden.

Arrested after that rising, he spent eight years in jail, mostly in Russia and in atrocious conditions, and then four years in Siberian exile. In 1861 he escaped from Siberia to Western Europe.

Bakunin was still a revolutionary democrat rather than a strong socialist. At first his political plan was to work with the liberal exile Alexander Herzen. Then he flirted inconclusively with Garibaldi and with the Polish nationalist leader Mieroslawski.

He came to call himself a "revolutionary socialist". In 1867-8 he and some friends entered and tried to take over the just-launched radical-bourgeois League for Peace and Freedom.

He gave up within a year; but he wrote an elaborate document putting his views to the League — probably the longest and most complete political statement which Bakunin, notorious for rarely finishing things he started writing, ever published. It suggests that he then still saw his "revolutionary socialism" as more extreme than bourgeois

democracy, rather than in irreducible class opposition to it. He acclaimed the “complete emancipation... of industry and commerce... from the supervision and protection of the State”; remonstrated that “the majority of decent, industrious bourgeois” could quite well support his, Bakunin’s, programme; limited his social-economic demands to changing “the law of inheritance, gradually at first, until it is entirely abolished as soon as possible”; and made no demand for the expropriation of capitalist property or the collective ownership of the means of production.

Disappointed in the League, he joined the International in 1868. His focus was still on anti-statism, and no doubt he still thought of Marx as “vain, perfidious, and cunning”; but his writings of that time suggest that he was genuinely won over by Marx’s ideas as transmitted through the International. They read as paraphrases — with a particular bias and twist, but paraphrases — of the general ideas of the International. He started work on a Russian translation of Marx’s *Capital*, which he would never finish.

Diffuse and restless as ever in his thinking, in 1869-70 he got drawn into an alliance by a demented “nihilist”, Sergei Nechayev, who held that the true revolutionary was defined by contempt for all moral standards, including in his dealings with his own comrades, and “must ally himself with the savage word of the violent criminal, the only true revolutionary in Russia”.

He recoiled from Nechayev. Bakunin supported France in the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, and with a couple of comrades made an abortive attempt at an anarchist rising in Lyon (September 1870).

In 1870-2, finding sympathy for his resentments against Marx among Swiss activists of the International, Bakunin led a faction fight which ended in the split of September 1872. Soon after that, in October 1873, he resigned from his local organisation, the Jura Federation, on grounds of ill-health and political disappointment. He spent most of the remaining time before his death in July 1876 in seclusion.

Some of Bakunin’s ideas would be developed and codified, from the mid-1870s to World War One, by Peter Kropotkin, a much clearer and more systematic writer than Bakunin. But Bakunin’s is not the record of a political figure who could in 1871-2 have represented a distinct “class-struggle” opposition to supposedly stodgier ideas coming from Marx.

ELECTORAL

The Bakunin wing’s opposition in 1871-2 to electoral activity by socialists was not an exaggerated but understandable reaction against socialists allowing that activity to suck in too much of their energies and their hopes.

At that time working-class electoral candidates were extremely rare. Later new issues would arise. Socialists would allow electoral activity to suck in too much of their energies and their hopes.

The general principle established by Marx of the need for socialists to build and seek to broaden out trade unions would be complicated by the rise of trade-union bureaucracies, increasingly separating off into a distinct social layer mediating between workers and the bosses.

Those developments would give new life to anarchism, or at least to that wing of anarchism which swung away from the “propaganda of the deed” (assassinations of ruling-class figures) which had dominated anarchist activity in the 1880s to try to find a new basis in the growing workers’ movements.

The revolutionary syndicalism of the decades before World War One was never (despite Schmidt and van der Walt) exclusively or even in majority anarchist; but some anarchists, such as Fernand Pelloutier and Emile Pouget in France, played a positive and important part in developing it.

It became, as Trotsky would put it, “a remarkable rough draft of revolutionary communism”. Where the pre-1914 “political” socialists, too often, were content with the general perspective of building up and strengthening the workers’ movement, the revolutionary syndicalists worked to transform, to invigorate, to democratise, to educate a workers’ movement which they understood would tend to become conservatised and bureaucratised if left to its spontaneous course in capitalist society.

That dimension of socialist activity was taken up by the Communist International in its early years (1919-22), but quickly marginalised as the Communist International became Stalinised. Today groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party leave it marginalised, and in that sense the revolutionary syndicalism which Schmidt and van der Walt celebrate still has ideas to teach us, ideas which need to be rediscovered and redeveloped in today’s conditions.

When the IWW leader Big Bill Haywood, in August 1920, read an appeal by the Communist International leadership written to try to convince IWW activists that the International was the best continuation of the IWW’s tradition, he exclaimed: “Here is what we have been dreaming about; here is the IWW all feathered out!”

He was right, I think. Schmidt’s and van der Walt’s scheme, by contrast, is traditional anarchism all feathered up.

Suze Rotolo (pictured above, with Dylan) was a big influence on Dylan in the early 1960s. He has written: “I knew her mother was associated with unions, and she was into this equality-freedom thing long before I was. I checked the songs out with her.”

Dylan at 70: his 1960s “protest songs” revisited

This month the American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan marks his 70th birthday. In the early 1960s he was reckoned to be a “protest singer”, a direct voice of the left. His songs referred straightforwardly to political issues — the black civil rights movement in the USA, anti-militarism — and he performed at political events like the 1963 civil rights March on Washington.

Since then he has produced a long stream of new songs, and repeatedly been charged with “selling out”, first when he used an electric rather than an acoustic guitar in 1965.

He was largely off the public stage in 1966-74; became a born-again Christian in the late 1970s, but eased back into secular songs over the 1980s; has been performing on stage, in the Never Ending Tour, continuously since 1988.

As a tribute, and as an attempt to show that Dylan did not stop protesting in 1964, Peter Burton gives a brief account of some of his Sixties songs.

The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan (1963): “Masters of War” condemns the arms industry. “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall” is an apocalyptic representation of a post-nuclear war fall-out. It was released a few weeks before the Cuban missile crisis, but the crisis gave it edge. Dylan’s Greenwich Village friend, the Trotskyist Dave Van Ronk, commented on hearing the song: “I was acutely aware that it represented the beginning of an artistic revolution.”

The Times They are a Changin’ (1964): Title song “The Times they are a Changin’” was a battle hymn for the youth whose aim was a new Republic. There are biblical undercurrents from the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Sermon on the Mount (the meek inheriting the earth), and Mark 10.31 — “But many who are now first shall be last, and the last shall be first”.

“With God on our Side” was one of the most performed finger-pointing songs of the early Sixties. The tune was taken from Dominic Behan’s “The Patriot Game”. It deals with the distortions of history in school, the war-mongers falsely claiming to have God on their side during the course of the genocide against native Americans, the Mexican and Civil Wars, and then two world wars. There is a sardonic twist at the end: if God’s on our side, then he’ll stop the next war.

“Only a Pawn in their Game” was a protest against the murder of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers in June 1963, following the successful enrolment of two black students at the University of Alabama earlier in the day.

Another Side of Bob Dylan (1964): “Chimes of Freedom” was written during a drug-fuelled cross-country road trip in February 1964 which took in the Mardi Gras. Dylan and a friend are caught in a storm and dive into a doorway to take cover as church bells begin to ring out.

In form it is heavily influenced by the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, and marked a turning point away from straight-talking, finger-pointing protest. Instead of support for a specific cause or individual, there are chimes of freedom for all the dispossessed, marginalised and downtrodden.

Bringing it All Back Home (1965): The militant underground group Weatherman would take its name from a line in the song “Subterranean Homesick Blues”: “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows”. The song was used in the Pennebaker documentary “Don’t Look Back”, with Dylan throwing cards on the ground while Allen Ginsburg looks on. Joan Baez thought the song nihilistic, but a whole generation of youth identified with it.

“Maggie’s Farm” was possibly influenced by Pete Seeger’s “Penny’s Farm”, a song that criticised the meanness of a landlord. Dylan expands this out to condemn the whole system of industrial relations. Worker alienation is the main issue of the song. It indicts all those in power who impose their uniformity causing human estrangement in the process. The song went through a revival during Thatcher’s early years in office.

“It’s Alright Ma” is a variation on the Blues singer Arthur Crudup’s “That’s alright, mama”. Dylan sings about a manipulative corporate America that cares only about profits and never about the damage done to people and their mental health. Some of the lines have become part of the language — “Money doesn’t talk, it swears,” “Even the President of the United States sometimes has to stand naked”.

Highway 61 Revisited (1965): When *Highway 61 Revisited* was finished, Dylan commented: “My records are not gonna be better from now on... Highway 61 is just too good. There’s a lot of stuff in there which I would listen to”.

“Like a Rolling Stone” was a turning point for Dylan, original in its lyrics and musical style — and in its length, over six minutes. Dylan’s audience of young people expanded enormously with this one record. There has been much speculation over the years as to who the main character is, but whoever it is, he/she is an aloof, rich, cocooned individual suddenly hitting the bottom with Dylan repeatedly, tauntingly, asking how this feels.

“Desolation Row” (longer, at 11 minutes) has Dylan’s by now familiar group of targets — shameless academics, cold-hearted elite figures, faceless bureaucrats, hypocritical religious leaders. Those who escape to “Desolation Row” are the outsiders, the rebels, Marxists, anarchists. This is protest on a more sophisticated level than the pre-“sell-out” “finger-pointing” songs.

John Wesley Harding (1967): “I dreamed I saw St Augustine” adapts the song, “I dreamed I saw Joe Hill”, about the martyred Utah union organiser. Dylan protests about the commercialism of 1960s America. The adaptation is far more sceptical about the power of collective action than “Hill”, and also rejects the idea of any individual martyr saving humanity.

“All Along the Watchtower” was written at the time of bitter arguments with Dylan’s manager Albert Grossman and the record company CBS. “Businessmen they drink my wine, ploughmen dig my earth”.

Art house cinemas are showing a number of films about Dylan in tribute. Catch them if you can.

- All the lyrics are at www.bobdylan.com/songs

We should work in the mass organisations

Stuart Jordan responds to North London Solidarity Federation (SolFed) in our continuing debate on the differences and similarities between Marxist and anarchist traditions.

SolFed’s contribution to our debate on anarchism and class struggle (*Solidarity* 3-204) makes good use of the “straw man” technique of debate. This is arguably a bigger block on healthy debate in the anti-capitalist movement than the “inhibitions” caused by a “hierarchical structure”... whatever that means. Before we can explore the interesting points of difference, it is necessary to clear away some of the straw.

We are not for “taxation of the rich to fund public services” as an end goal. We are for a classless society based on the principle of “from each according to their ability to each according to their need”. Our disagreement with SolFed is how to achieve that goal. (There is an interesting debate here about the use of transitional demands but it will have to wait for another day.)

No one in Workers’ Liberty “defers to the Labour Party or to trade union leaderships”. We do not believe that the trade unions should stay within the “limitations of the current anti-trade union laws”. We think New Labour was a project of capitalist class war. We are in favour of striking against Labour governments and Labour councils (and we think workers should have the right to strike against any future socialist governments).

Our point of disagreement is about how we relate to mass working-class organisations.

MASS ORGANISATIONS

SolFed aims to initiate “anarcho-syndicalist unions”. Its members sometimes hold union cards “to avoid splits in the workplace between union members and non-union members”. But their involvement in the unions is purely tactical and secondary to the main task of creating organisations apart from the actually existing trade union movement with its seven million members.

Workers’ Liberty believes there is a class struggle taking place within the mass organisations of the working-class and it is unrevolutionary to abandon those organisations to their middle-class leaderships. The trade union bureaucrats maintain power through a conscious effort to keep the workers docile, apolitical and hopeless. Our task is to fight for a working-class programme and the fullest possible participative democracy within the unions right now.

The struggle to build union strength against the bosses is also the struggle to organise workers against the bureaucracy. The process of creating revolutionary trade unions will involve many splits and fusions. It is very improbable that Unite, Unison and the Labour Party will be organising mass strikes and political action in the heart of a working-class revolution. But we cannot ignore these mass organisations of our class in 2011. The struggle to change them for the better is an experience our class needs in order to create political equipment for the future.

HIERARCHY AND BUREAUCRACY

SolFed equate the bureaucratic structures of the trade union movement with the hierarchy of the “Leninist” party. But this is dishonest.

The mass, participative, democratic organisations that SolFed advocate would involve an organic leadership (elected individuals) linked to a base. That is a form of hierarchy.

The problem is not one of “hierarchy” as such but whether a leadership is accountable and uses its limited power to encourage democratic involvement and empower the rank-and-file.

The history of our class shows many revolutionaries — including syndicalists — who have won the leaderships of mass organisations in order to more effectively argue for their political ideals. They did not stand for election in order to win power for power’s sake.

SolFed look at Stop the War Coalition, the trade union movement and the Labour Party and diagnose a problem of “hierarchy”. We look at these organisations and diagnose a problem of “middle-class politics”. True, politics cannot be divorced from questions of organisation, but SolFed stand the relationship on its head. In their scheme, the hierarchical form of organisation creates the middle-class politics.

In fact, the bureaucratic structures are necessary to graft middle-class political leadership (be it the Blairites, the six-figure salaried trade union leaders, or the Muslim Association of Britain) onto a working-class base. Our task is to make clear these contradictions and build up rank-and-file organisation to challenge the leadership politically and organisationally.

At any given time, some people have a deeper understanding, more resolve, courage, experience or ability than others. If this were not the case, then revolutionary organisations would not need to exist.

Leaders in any context are only there to inspire others and help more effectively build our movement. We believe, like you, that the unions need to be built from the ground up. However, we differ from you in that we believe that a principled revolutionary leadership is necessary, possible and, importantly, can and should renew itself.

Workers’ Liberty’s idea of a revolutionary party is one which aims to group together the most politically class conscious workers to intervene in the movement against the political organisations of bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie.

We do not believe that we *are* that revolutionary party but we organise in the spirit of the organisation we want to build in the future. Nor do not we think that this organisation is a model for a future society, any more than we think a workers’ militia is a model for a classless society.

ENGAGING

We do not equate hierarchy with bureaucratism but with experience tested in struggle. We want the maximum democracy and transparency.

The elected leadership of AWL is subject to constant scrutiny and can be recalled by the membership. We have freedom to form factions, open access to the press, and we are obliged to explain our differences with the majority line in public.

SolFed neglect to engage with the working-class movement as it really exists — with leaders (which are wholly inadequate) and hierarchy which is about bureaucracy. They construct an ideal working-class movement in their heads and try and call that ideal into being.

Yet through our approach — through engaging with the messy, compromised and often corrupted labour movement — we have been able to help organise the illegal direct action and rank-and-file organisation that you advocate. It was our initiative that has built one of the most successful rank-and-file organisations in the country on the London Underground. Our initiative was responsible for sparking the Vestas occupation of 2009.

If we were bigger, and more united with serious class-struggle organisations such as SolFed — even to a limited extent — then we would all be able to achieve much more.

Through joint work we would seek to convince you, through the process of struggle, to our revolutionary praxis of testing theory in the real arena of class struggle, the mass organisations of our class.



Readers respond to Pat Murphy’s article “Why super-injunctions are good” (*Solidarity* 3-204).

Privacy for all

Like Pat, I have no love of the tabloid press, and I have no doubt that they oppose super-injunctions for reasons of making money rather than free enquiry; but just because the *Sun* opposes something, it doesn’t make it right.

A disdain for the reporting of celebrity gossip is healthy, but in large part these super-injunctions are not to stop idle gossip but to hide pretty uncomfortable facts.

The current super-injunctions are mere playthings of the rich and famous. For most ordinary people the popular press can lie and invade privacy with impunity. One super-injunction prevented the press reporting details of an industrial tribunal hearing sexual harassment charges against a famous celebrity chef. Surely we want our employers and colleagues to know that sexual harassment cases are taken seriously and investigated, pursued through legal mechanisms, and reported by the press.

Pat ignores the fact that many plaintiffs’ motivation is protecting their public image, as with the footballer who wants to cultivate a public image of a clean-cut family man aloof from the flash and brash of your standard footballer.

While I agree with Pat that it would be a better world if these characters’ affairs were not headline news, that’s not something we can influence at this stage.

The answer to this celebrity culture is neither greater power in the hands of celebrities to make public only pleasant aspects of their image, nor further powers for anyone to prevent the press publicising genuine public interest stories, nor for judges to be allowed to define the law.

What is required is a general right to privacy for everyone, enforceable by criminal rather than civil law,

so that rights are guaranteed to everyone rather than just the super-wealthy.

Martin Ohr, Leeds

Keep it civil

Pat wrote “All other things being equal, a libertarian socialist would be for the right of the press to print stories irrespective of whether we agree with them or are comfortable with the content.”

That is right and should be the guiding principle here. But Pat totally fails to show why other things aren’t equal in the cases he discusses — perhaps because, hoist by his own petard, he cannot do so without discussing the actual content of the cases which are subject to the injunctions.

It seems to me that the right to privacy (which I think needs to be qualified in any case) can be balanced legally against free speech by a broad but strict interpretation defined in law of “public interest”, which could serve to draw a line between trivial and intrusive tabloid celebrity bollocks and cases like Trafigura. As to proposals to use the criminal law, that would leave the way open for the state to prosecute all sorts of material they wished not to be published.

The only sensible way to equalise things financially is by a massive extension of legal aid to cover access to libel law, etc.

Bruce Robinson, Manchester

No to censorship

Suppose that wealth ceased to be the decisive factor in obtaining a gagging order. An authoritarian law based on the principle that the state should define the public interest with regard to the press remains just that regardless of who invokes it. It is also quite a hostage to fortune from a revolutionary point of view.

The trashiness of the British press is not the relevant background for this discussion.

Our demand to “open the books” recognises the eternal utility of secrecy to power and censorship to the state. A “better, clearer” censor’s charter is not a working-class demand. “Don’t trust the capitalists with your liberties, freedom of speech!” is.

Socialists and even principled liberals should respond to the evident conflict between the famous and horny and the

paper proprietors by demanding, as a bare minimum, an end to official censorship and a guarantee on freedom of speech equal to that of the first amendment to the American Constitution.

Only then will we be able to properly expose the hypocrisy of the media moguls by showing just how little they care about liberty, and just how much we do.

Robert Fox, Oxford

Better journalism

The first major problem with Pat’s piece is the way he conflates the issue of content in the media and the right to privacy.

I think all good socialists would agree that having a mainstream media obsessed with celebrity and not dealing with politics is a bad thing. However, to condemn this change in the media as not a natural evolution is barmy. It is, sadly, completely natural, and brought about by capitalism seeking to maximise profit from the press.

It is a lot cheaper and easier for the media to deal with “tittle tattle” than to pay investigative journalists, or for journalists to sit in courts/council meetings/Parliament. It is our role as socialists to address this issue.

Pat is wrong when he assigns a role for the (bourgeois dominated) courts to step in and save the media. When have socialists turned to the courts to defend us on such large issues? In a situation where the left is weak, it is practical to pursue cases against sexual discrimination/right to strike, etc., through the courts, just as we take a stance in Parliamentary elections and would support workers’ rights bills. But it is also important that we do not rely on one bourgeois group to dictate to another what they can and can’t print. Rather we should be taking this on ourselves, perhaps through empowering media unions, for example, not through a law.

Pat is right to say a right to privacy should apply to us all, as should access to the courts. We do have privacy laws in UK/EU law already.

What is worrying is that an extreme version of this right to privacy is being used as a tool to dismantle the principle of right to open justice — to be banned from even reporting on an injunction is just crazy.

Will Lodge, NUJ member, Essex

PCS needs a strategy to win

By a civil servant

PCS conference has agreed that members will be balloted over jobs, pensions, redundancy payouts and pay. This ballot begins immediately, the union hoping that if members vote yes, then it will take joint strike action with the NUT on 30 June.

The bulk of delegates at conference agreed that the ballot should begin straightaway even though in many areas this will mean mobilising members from a standing start but the prospect of co-ordinating action with NUT is

too important to miss.

After 30 June — already being dubbed the glorious 30th — we move from the realm of plans to hopes.

PCS are looking for joint action with other unions later in the year. Which unions we don't know, because PCS does not know.

At the conference the union signed a concordat with Unite. The problem is that, apart from the MoD, the membership of the two unions don't overlap much in the Civil Service or the wider public sector. Unite's real strength lies in the private sector.

There is no sign of Unison coming on board so far,

so it appears that PCS will be hoping that the education unions will return to the fray over pensions late in 2011.

To fill the gap between 30 June and more national action later in the year, PCS wants Groups (these organise members in each government department) to take action if they can over jobs or any other issue covered by the national ballot. PCS says that the national ballot will give legal coverage to the Groups.

Groups fighting over local issues will not win the national goals set for the ballot. A better plan would have been to combine paid,

selective action with more national action. There are many vital parts of the Civil Service which, if taken out, disproportionately affect the service.

Unfortunately, although the use of selective action was agreed by conference, the Socialist Party leadership of the union opposes this type of action; hence the call for Group action.

There is an incipient cult of personality developing within the union coupled with a self-congratulatory tone. Delegates close to the leadership regaled conference with stories of how membership meetings unanimously endorse

whatever "turn" the union has decreed.

Delegates are reminded that the President is the best and is our natural leader; the same goes for the senior officers, particularly Mark Serwotka. An ovation is guaranteed if delegates are reminded of his recent appearance on "Question Time".

Such behaviour endangers critical examination of the leadership's past record and future plans.

While we must win the ballot for the 30th — and win it big — we also need to develop, quickly, a real plan to win. Currently the union has no such plan.

GMB and Welfare to Work

By Matthew Thompson

A report produced by the University of Portsmouth and accountancy firm PKF, "Welfare to Work in the 21st Century", is based in part, it says, on interviews with "23 clients from difficult to employ groups: 18 of who were identified via Kennedy Scott and 5 via the GMB".

Kennedy Scott is an employment training provider currently delivering the New Deal programme for the Department for Work and Pensions in London and the South East. The report recommends that "the DWP pilot a US welfare-to-work programme developed by America Works". The same US workfare company is known for the

draconian regime it imposes on its unemployed "clients".

In a statement on the report GMB General Secretary Paul Kenny is quoted as saying: "The GMB is looking at how best to support both our members who are facing redundancy as the public sector cuts bite and those suffering the scourge of long term unemployment. We welcome the idea of pilots across the country to evaluate how best to do this."

Since then a furore has erupted about why the GMB is, seemingly, supporting workfare. Paul Kenny wrote the following in response to a protest by Brighton and Hove TUC: "The GMB and myself are 100 percent opposed to Workfare and the privatisation of any public service including Employment

services.

"[re]... the document Kennedy Scott put out which suggested the GMB supported its contents by way of our logo... [the] GMB would never support welfare to work and we are pledged to support PCS in their struggle to retain direct employment services like Jobcentreplus."

Kenny cannot of course claim that the GMB did not take part in the original research.

Working-class solidarity alone demands that the trade unions have nothing to do with introducing workfare for the unemployed or bringing private companies into the welfare system.

Rank and file activists in the GMB need to hold the leadership of the union to account.

FBU conference: no ballot yet

By Darren Bedford

FBU conference last week geared up for industrial action on issues including pensions, pay and job cuts, although no timetable for action was set.

Speakers expressed the widespread anger with the government's pensions plans, which would make public sector workers pay more, work longer and get less. Firefighters will be hit particularly hard.

There was agreement on the need for action, but differences over timing and tactics. The executive council resolution, which was passed, called for a membership survey and continued lobbying in advance of action. However, many delegates supported a counter-resolution from

the London region calling for immediate ballots for industrial action including strikes.

The conference passed resolutions on cuts and austerity, going further than most unions in arguing for progressive taxation and public ownership as an alternative to the neoliberalism of the government and Labour opposition. The union warned that anger on pay was rising, given the employers' refusal to make an offer last year and the threat of a two-year pay freeze ahead. However, the union did not vote for action on the issue.

Despite a good debate, the conference overwhelmingly rejected a motion to reaffiliate to the Labour Party. In all these debates, the spectre of the 2002-3 pay dispute was evident.

One highlight of the conference was the presence of Egyptian union leader Kamal Abbas. The FBU had facilitated his invitation to the UK (along with the TUC and Egypt Workers Solidarity) and Abbas began his tour with a speech at the conference. After comparing firefighters' sense of duty in rescuing people to the solidarity that binds together the labour movement, delegates gave Abbas a standing ovation and a firefighters' axe.

Although the FBU is more democratic than most in terms of elected officials and lay representation, the absence of rank and file organisation and socialist clarity was evident in a number of the debates and in the relatively small fringe.

Support RMT member Clara Osagiede at her disciplinary hearing, Thursday 26 May
10am, Initial Cleaning Company HQ, 13-27 Brunswick Place; nearest Tube: Old Street, exit 1

CWU conference

By a conference delegate

This year's CWU Conference comes as the pressure in both the postal and telecoms sectors is set to increase.

In the Postal sector the threats from Royal Mail to close more mail centres has been met by postive ballots for strike action in the areas affected. The key question is whether those members affected will be left to fight alone or whether the Union will call a national ballot.

A motion from the Postal Executive giving them the authority to take national industrial action has been passed. Meanwhile, officers are in talks to see whether a deal can be done on the re-deployment of staff from closing mail centres.

Unsurprisingly it is some of the better organised mail centres such as East London that are in the front line. There is a real threat of compulsory redundancy as members who are redeployed may not be offered viable alternative posts

At CWU General Conference a motion calling for the TUC to coordinate a general strike was passed. However, this is just hot air if the CWU is not prepared to call members out on matters that directly affect them in the near future. It is unclear whether the leadership at national or regional level is up for this.

On pensions, the majority of members still retain rights to PRI-linked increases. Both Royal Mail and BT schemes have been "reformed" significantly already in the past few years.

There was a big focus at

the Conference on the need for the CWU to renew its efforts to recruit across the whole of the postal and telecoms sectors and not just in areas where we have large membership such as BT and Royal Mail.

Whilst the union also has recognition in firms such as O2 and Virgin Media and substantial membership in firms such as Sky and Orange, the CWU still has a long way to go before it is seen as the union for all communication workers.

At the Special Rules Revision session of the CWU Conference this year the union moved from annual to biennial executive elections, a regressive move that was only opposed significantly by the Communication Workers Broad Left, a predominately Telecoms supported faction. Annual General and Telecoms Conferences were retained but annual Postal Conference will change to alternative "Forum" based meetings.

The NEC size has been reduced by over a third, however it is not clear that the cutback in union officers will match the cut in lay representation. The tradition of the CWU as a lay led organisation has been dented by these changes.

In the Telecoms sector the newly formed "Left Activist Network" is supposedly a left rival to the CWBL, but has shown itself at Conference as nothing more than cheerleaders for the bureaucracy.

LAN activists have supported the reduction in BT pension rights, the three year below-inflation BT Pay deal and the introduction of "Service Delivery Transformation".

London Met

Max Watson, secretary of London Metropolitan University Unison, told *Solidarity* about the union's campaign against course closures

Our ballot for industrial action starts tomorrow, 25 May, and closes on 10 June.

We're calling for a yes both for strike action, and for action short of a strike, so we can impose a work-to-rule. We don't believe this fight will be won through one day of strike action; it will take a long campaign. We have an organising strategy which involves mobilising and involving all our members in the action, as well as recruiting new ones.

The student union has passed a motion of support. We've supported their struggle against cuts, and they're supporting ours. They know that when library workers, support staff, learning development staff go out, we'll be striking not just for ourselves, but for their education too. We have full support from London Met UCU, who are also balloting for action.

Jeremy Corbyn has tabled an Early Day Motion, so you can demand your MP supports that. We have a petition which already has over 1,000 signatures, and we're also asking for messages of solidarity.

- www.gopetition.com/petitions/support-london-metropolitan-university.html

- Messages of support to unison@londonmet.ac.uk

Heathrow Express

By Pdraig O'Brien

RMT members working for Heathrow Express will begin a 48-hour strike on Friday 28 May as they seek an improved pay offer from management.

Union leader Bob Crow has described the company's current pay deal as "loaded with strings" In its current form it would effectively punish workers for being sick or missing work for other legitimate reasons. Although it offers a pay increase, this is contingent on workers meeting attendance criteria.

Demonstrating the union's readiness to fight this battle seriously, the RMT has also named a further 24-hour strike on 24 June and plans more action in July.

The strike, voted for by 95% of workers on a turnout of over 80%, is the culmination of years of hard work by RMT reps and activist to build up industrial unionism at Heathrow Express, one of the only train operators in the country to have a majority of RMT membership (rather than ASLEF, the drivers-only craft union).

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

Tahrir Square comes to Spain

By James Bloodworth

"This is a protest they will never understand" said one youth, as he, along with around 2,000 other young people, camped out in Puerta del Sol square in Madrid, defying a ban on demonstrations in the days before municipal and regional elections on Sunday 22 May.

Bourgeois democracy in Spain is less brittle than the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt, and can "deal with" movements such as these youth demonstrations even if it can't understand them. But the inspiration from Tahrir Square is obvious.

The Establishment sees free-market capitalism as sitting at the end of a visible thread running through every epoch of human history. When a mass of people appear who do not share in this grand utopian project, the Establishment's response is total bewilderment. What could these people possibly be rebelling against? Protests against this or that government measure they can understand. A radical rejection of the whole system they cannot.

The protests began on 15 May. The police initially tried to disperse demonstrators, but since then the sheer numbers have forced

the authorities to take a softer approach.

One of the most popular slogans has been "Genuine Democracy Now", and stalls have been set-up urging people not to vote for the two major political parties — both of whom are planning harsh austerity measures.

Another chant was "violence is earning 600 euros", refreshingly counteracting predictable bourgeois sentimentality about broken windows whenever protests spill over the usual limits.

Spain currently has an unemployment rate of 21.3% — the highest in the EU — and a youth unemployment rate around 45%.

Some Spaniards who do have jobs are going months without pay, with their employers hanging the threat of unemployment over their heads.

The demonstrators in Madrid and other cities have declared their determination to continue the occupations of public squares and spaces for another week following the 22 May local and regional elections, which saw defeats for the ruling Socialist Party.

Some of the demonstrators say that the movement is "post-democratic", "not political", and "beyond left or right". But, as George Orwell put it, "There is no such thing as 'keeping out

of politics'".

If radicals try to keep out, that does not abolish politics, but leaves it to the conservatives (and so the right-wing People's Party gained in the 22 May elections, and on an as-high-as-usual poll). The radicals also leave themselves vulnerable to demagoguery.

Most encouraging is the fact that, outside of the mainstream narrative that ordinary people should bear the burden of the follies of European financial and political elites, large numbers of young people in Spain are demanding an altogether different course, even if the details are at present sketchy.

Tory NHS plan: profit, not need, will rule

David Price, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Health Sciences, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, talked to Stuart Jordan

The public planning system, which ensures that resources are allocated according to health needs in geographical areas, will be broken up. We will see increasing private sector control over the allocation of resources and allocation driven by financial incentives.

At the moment Primary Care Trusts must provide comprehensive universal healthcare for geographic populations. GP commissioning consortia will not have this statutory duty.

Consortia will represent specific geographical areas but their duties to the whole population are not specified in the legislation. In fact the consortia can form from GP practices anywhere in the country. They will be able to choose which patients they want to take responsibility for.

The Bill will allow GP consortia to choose which services they charge for. At the moment, this power lies solely with the Secretary of State. Consortia will decide which services are part of the NHS and which are chargeable. Private companies are also coming in and choosing which patients they want to treat.

So, instead of a publicly owned system which plans for the provision of universal healthcare, we will have a private planning system. This involves a different set of priorities, involving selection not inclusiveness.

There are a lot of confusing messages coming out of the "listening exercise". At one point it was stated that Andrew Lansley would be sacked from his role as Health Minister. Days later he was sitting on the front bench surrounded by Tory ministers.

I believe that Steve Field [chair of the government-appointed review body] originally supported the reforms but is now more critical. Like many, he sees threats to integrated care and the hospital infrastructure, as companies come in and cherry-pick services.

However, his criticism does not address all of the issues. Some say that the Bill is unamendable.

I am not sure whether the health service groups in opposition will be convinced by the listening exercise.

The Royal College of General Practitioners is leading the charge on challenging the Bill and is doing extremely well.

Among other things they are calling for the Bill to restore the principle that the Secretary of State has a duty to secure the provision of a comprehensive service, that only the Minister has a statutory power to impose charges on services. They are also fighting hard against fragmentation of the service.

CRITICS

Some critics say that even without legislative reform the government can push ahead with privatisation.

We already see that private sector management is coming in, wards are closing down, and staff are being sacked. A general reduction in NHS capacity gives potential for the private sector to grow.

But the Bill is still significant. It is a political mechanism to remove responsibility for providing universal healthcare from the Secretary of State in order that a different financing system can be introduced. By giving consortia power to charge and the power to decide what constitutes the NHS, the door is opened to user charges and co-insurance.

Mark Britnell, former Head of NHS Commissioning and now working for KPMG and the Prime Minister's Kitchen Cabinet on health care, believes that is exactly what should happen. We also know that supplementary health insurance is the reform path of choice in a number of OECD countries, so it is definitely a fashion.

Seventeen years ago Julian Tudor-Hart unearthed similar objectives formulated by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. He called it "the project" because it had been the undisclosed goal for so many years. If there is a project it is now nearly completed.

Tube: rank-and-file must be in driving seat

By a Tube worker

Tube drivers could now strike alongside other public sector workers on 30 June as part of the ongoing dispute to win the reinstatement of victimised union activist Arywn Thomas.

The participation of Tube workers in a day of mass strike action would be positive, but the decision (which, as we go to press, is not formal; the RMT union has not yet named any official dates) represents a step back from what had been won in the dispute so far: the union Exec would be guided by the rank-and-file Train Grades Commit-

tee. The TGC had voted on 20 May to advocate 48 hours of strike action, spread across the week beginning 20 June.

However, Workers' Liberty member Janine Booth was one of only two votes on the union's General Grades Committee (the executive body which has the ultimate say in the dispute) to endorse this strategy.

Part of the reason for delaying naming strikes is that some on the RMT's Executive fear that taking the decision to call strikes during Arwyn's Employment Tribunal, which started on 23 May and is scheduled to run for four days, would annoy the Tri-

bunal and make it less likely to rule in Arwyn's favour. This strategy is mistaken; we can win by putting pressure on the employer by naming strikes during the Tribunal (with the strikes themselves taking place afterwards).

With the dispute at a crucial stage, it is vital that the leadership is not allowed to sideline the rank-and-file voice in the dispute. Token participation in the 30 June strikes (which runs the risk of seeing the victimisation dispute "drowned" in a much wider and "bigger" issue) is not a good enough reason to explicitly ignore the democratically-decided

policy of a rank-and-file strike committee. The organising work and strategy discussions of this committee have been crucial to the successes of this dispute so far — of the three RMT reps sacked by January, two are now back at work.

When the union names dates, the task for all activists — including those who disagree with the timetable — will be to build to ensure that the strikes are as solid and effective as possible.

But the latest turn highlights again the desperate need for grassroots committees, and ordinary union members to have control of our own disputes.